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THE POETRY OF THE OLD TESTAMENT.

MILTON, that supreme master of English verse, has written about the poetry to be found in the Bible. It will be well to recall his words: "Those frequent songs throughout the law and the prophets, not in their divine argument alone but in the very critical art of composition, may be easily made appear over all kinds of lyric poetry to be incomparable." This is extraordinary praise, but I think we shall find that it is justified. Hebrew poetry is one of the priceless treasures that the brain of man is acquainted with, and, as such, is able to enter undismayed and unchallenged the literary valhalla of the world.

When we commence our examination of Hebrew poetry we must bear in mind that we have to study it through the medium of a translation. This, at first sight, is a grave defect. A translation, generally speaking, is never equal to the original. The subtle magic of words, and their power and hold over the memory and the imagination, disappear, and only the bald, naked thought remains, and sometimes not even this. To understand exactly what I mean, take the translations of Shakespeare or Burns into French. The words of these poets become bizarre and grotesque in their new dress; lines which thrill us in the original make us only smile, or laugh outright, when we come across them in the language of the boulevard. This is seemingly inevitable. The aroma, if I may so express it, is lost when we pour the original nectar into other cups and goblets. And yet, despite this serious limitation—and we are perfectly willing to admit it—we still maintain that Hebrew poetry as we have it in our English Bible is immortal and imperishable. Some translations rival their originals in power and beauty, and it is so with our English Bible.

For example, take the book of Psalms, the hymnal of the Jewish Church. The English translation of the Psalter, to all intents and purposes, was accomplished early in the six-

teenth century. The English language at this time was still plastic, and so could readily be made to give back more than an echo of the Hebrew. The result was one of the marvels of literature. The English version of the Psalter, whether in the Prayer Book or in the Bible of King James, is more than a mere translation; it is a veritable reincarnation. The rugged energy, the pealing trumpet tones, and, above and beyond everything else, the passion, deep, powerful, and impetuous, which characterized the original, all reappear in the English version. Truly do we owe a debt of gratitude to those translators. They have given us a noble literature in a language that is seemingly destined to be some day the language of the world.

Admitting, then, that we have magnificent poetry in the Bible, under what form or forms does it show itself? Does the ordinary reader know when he is reading poetry and when he is reading prose? In the Authorized Version there is no way except by reference to the context; in the Revised Version, happily, the poetical parts are indicated by a change in printing.

Hebrew poetry, moreover, had no rhyme, though it undoubtedly had a system of rhythms and meters. The only thing we know is that "the fundamental form of Hebrew verse is the couplet of two lines, the second line either repeating or in some way reënforcing or completing the thought of the first." It is known as "parallelism," and in a general way constitutes the canon of Hebrew poetry. Take an example from one of the lyric outbursts of Balaam as he beholds afar off the tents of Israel:

Blessed be every one that blesseth thee,
And cursed be every one that curseth thee.

With this fact in our minds, that nearly all of Hebrew poetry possesses this form of parallelism, we next pass to the question: What kind of poetry is it? This is an important question, and one that must be answered before we can properly understand and appreciate the poetry of the Old Testament. The Greeks, with that keenness of intellect which makes their definitions finalities in literary criticism, divided

all poetry into three kinds: epic, dramatic, and lyric. Under which of these can biblical poetry be classified?

Obviously it cannot be epic. There is no poetry in the Old Testament which resembles even in a small way the poems of Homer or Virgil. The Jewish people had no national hero like Ulysses or Æneas. Their hero was Jehovah, the Lord God Almighty.

If there is no trace of the epic in our Bibles, can we find any that would come under the second classification, the dramatic? Are there any dramas in the Old Testament, such, for example, as Sophocles produced in Greek or Shakespeare in English? Here again we must answer no. The drama was alien to the Hebrew genius in the centuries before Christ, though in modern times some of the greatest actors have been descendants of the children of Israel. The Jews, in the olden time, would not even tolerate a theater, much less compose pieces to be presented on its boards. So strong was the prejudice against it as a heathen abomination that as late as the days of Herod the Great, hundreds of years after the last Hebrew poetry was incorporated into the Old Testament, the people rose *en masse* against the attempt on the part of that tyrant to introduce a theater into Jerusalem.

Commenting on Hebrew poetry and its failure to develop either the epic or the drama, Renan remarks: "The imagination of the Semitic races has never passed out of the narrow circle traced round it by the exclusive preoccupation with the divine grandeur. God and man in the presence of one another, in the bosom of the desert; that is the abridgment, as we may say now, the form of all their poetry. The Semites are unacquainted with those kinds of poesy which are based on the development of an action, the epic, the drama; and those kinds of speculation which are based on an experimental or rational method, philosophy and science. Their poetry is the song; their philosophy is the proverb."

There remains, therefore, the last classification—the lyric—and to it Hebrew poetry most unquestionably belongs. What is lyric poetry? It is "that form of poetry whose object is to give expression to thought as penetrated with emotion." The

lyric poet “gives vent to his personal emotions or experiences—his joys or sorrows, his cares or complaints, his aspirations or despair; or he reproduces in words the impressions which nature or history may have made upon him.” Thus lyric poetry, the poetry of feeling and sentiment, covers a wide field. It embraces the folklore songs in the Pentateuch, as well as the unrivaled outbursts of lyric joy and passion in Job and the Song of Songs. It covers the triumphal odes in Exodus and Judges, the national anthems, the ballads of love and war, the elegies, personal and national, that meet us in the book of Psalms. In a word, lyric poetry is the one kind of poetry that we must look for in our study of the Old Testament.

Turn to the Psalter. When our eyes are opened to its literary beauties we shall find it contains an endless variety of the most common form of the lyric—the hymn. We find hymns for morning and evening (Ps. ii., iv., v.); a storm hymn, “The Song of the Thunderstorm” (Ps. xxix.); hymns of victory (Ps. xviii., xx., xxi., cviii.); hymns of praise and thanksgiving, under which designation the great oratorio (Ps. cxiii.–cxviii.) appropriately comes. There are also festal hymns, votive hymns, and temple hymns almost without number.

With the statement that all the poetry in the Old Testament is lyric in its form, let us notice more closely some illustrations; because, after all, the object of this informal and untechnical essay is not to exploit any novel ideas, but to try to induce some one to go back to the Bible with a renewed appreciation of its literary treasures. The literature of the Bible is great enough easily to plead its own cause; my part is simply to act as a guide to point the way to the Hebrew Helicon.

The first example of Hebrew poetry to be found in the Bible is the sword song of Lamech, in the fourth chapter of the book of Genesis. In the Authorized Version there is no indication that it is poetry; in the Revised Version it is shown by a change in printing:

Adah and Zillah, hear my voice;
Ye wives of Lamech, hearken unto my speech:
For I have slain a man for wounding me,
And a young man for bruising me:
If Cain shall be avenged sevenfold,
Truly Lamech seventy and seven fold!

This, on its face, is a folklore ditty, and it can be duplicated by many others in the Pentateuch. Space will permit me to quote but one more of this nature. It is the song of the well in the twenty-first chapter of the book of Numbers:

Spring up, O well; sing ye unto it:
The well which the princes digged,
Which the nobles of the people delved,
With the scepter, and with their staves.

This charming little carol was no doubt often sung by the maidens of Israel in after years as they let down their buckets for water. The beautiful blessings of the patriarchs are also in the form of songs, as are, too, those wonderful examples of lyric ecstasy on the part of Balaam, as with eyes open, in a sort of trance, he chants the glories of Israel. It is necessarily impossible in the limited space at my disposal to go through the Old Testament and describe, or even name, all the songs to be found there. The Bible is no longer a chained book. It lies open for every one's inspection. Suffice it to say that the form of lyric poetry known as the "song" can be found in almost countless numbers in the Old Testament.

There are numerous examples of the elegy—a lyric poem lamenting the dead, or a reflective and meditative composition with a sorrowful theme. There is, to begin with, the elegy of David over Saul and Jonathan, a very gem. The Psalms, moreover, furnish us with numerous examples that are striking in their beauty. Think of the seventy-ninth Psalm: "O God, the heathen are come into thine inheritance: thy holy temple have they defiled, and made Jerusalem an heap of stones. The dead bodies of thy servants have they given to be meat unto the fowls of the air. And the flesh of thy saints unto the beasts of the land. Their blood have they shed like water on every side of Jerusalem: and

there was no man to bury them. We are become an open shame to our enemies: a very scorn and derision unto them that are round about us. Lord, how long wilt thou be angry? Shall thy jealousy burn like fire forever?"

But there are many others. The forty-fourth, the seventy-fourth, the eightieth, the eighty-eighth, and the one hundred and second Psalms are all elegies; so are the elegies of denunciation, national and individual, in Psalms lxxxiii., cxxix., lii., lviii., lxxxii., lv., xxxv., cix., cxi. Cannot we feel the passion that throbs through these verses of the eighty-third Psalm? It is an elegy of national denunciation, and the singer is pouring out his heart against the enemies of Israel: "Hold not thy tongue, O God, keep not still silence: refrain not thyself, O God. For lo, thine enemies make a murmuring: and they that hate thee have lift up their head. . . . O my God, make them like unto a wheel: and as the stubble before the wind; Like as the fire that burneth up the wood: and as the flame that consumeth the mountains. Persecute them even with thy tempest: and make them afraid with thy storm!"

A splendid example of the elegy is in the Lamentations of Jeremiah. What could be more stately and sonorous than the opening words: "How doth the city sit solitary, that was full of people! How is she become as a widow! She that was great among the nations, and princess among the provinces, how is she become tributary!"

Another form of lyric poetry in the Old Testament is the ode. The triumphant song of Moses and Miriam in the fifteenth chapter of the book of Exodus is an ode worthy of the occasion. It celebrates a nation's happiness in escaping from a cruel bondage. "It is the grandest ode to liberty that was ever sung. And it is this because its homage is rendered not to some ideal spirit of liberty, deified by a people in the moment of that passionate and frantic joy which follows the successful assertion of their independence, but because it is a thanksgiving to Him who is the One only Giver of victory and of freedom."

This superb ode was chanted in antiphonal measure,

chorus answering chorus. "It was sung accompanied by dancing, and to the music of the maidens playing upon the timbrels." If we are blessed with an atom of historical imagination, we can realize the whole picture. We can hear the mighty chorus of the men shouting forth their faith in Jehovah:

The Lord is a man of war:
The Lord is his name.
Pharaoh's chariots and his host hath he cast into the sea:
And his chosen captains are sunk in the Red Sea,
The deeps cover them:
They went down into the depths like a stone!

And then the voices of the women, shrill, clear, and almost piercing in their intensity:

Sing ye to the Lord, for he hath triumphed gloriously;
The horse and his rider hath he thrown into the sea.

The men and women answer each other alternately in choruses to the end of the ode. It is more than a coincidence that Handel and Rossini used these words for their oratorios. It is only natural and fitting that the splendid words should be set to splendid music. When this has been accomplished we need not fear that to both words and music will be vouchsafed the gift of immortality.

With the conviction that there is magnificent poetry in the Old Testament, let us now pass to a brief consideration of its essential character. As we study the different peoples of antiquity, we find that each had its peculiar genius. With the Greek it was art; with the Roman it was law; with the Jew it was religion. Therefore we shall expect—and we shall not be disappointed—that Jewish poetry will show forth the national genius.

Take the Hebrew hymnal, the book of Psalms. Nowhere else, in ancient or modern times, is there a collection of poems more saturated with the religious spirit. Faith in one almighty, all-holy, ever-living God pulsates through almost every Hebrew song and hymn. God and the human soul are brought face to face in Hebrew poetry. "The hope and the fear and the sorrow, all the aching of heart; the rest-

less, unsatisfied longing; all the dull, deep pain and constant anguish of patience," are in the songs of David: but so, too, is the joy, the delight, and the glorious certainty of victory that comes from implicit faith in a loving Father. The heights and depths of man's spiritual nature are here portrayed. The Hebrew poet expresses the longing of the soul after its Creator in language that will never grow old: it is the wearied hart panting after the water brooks, or the storm-driven bird fleeing to the mountains for refuge and protection. Thus the songs and hymns of the Old Testament are, above everything else, religious poems.

The other characteristic of Hebrew poetry is its intense nationalism. It is the poetry of the Jewish people in Palestine. This can be seen at a glance by a reference to almost any lyric. Hebrew poetry is forever haunted by two great ideas: national unity and supernatural guidance. A poet will begin to chant his own joys or sorrows; but as soon as his imagination is kindled, he will pass to a description of the glories of his nation's history. I imagine that Hebrew poetry is the most national poetry that the world of literature records.

It will perhaps be wise, in conclusion, to cite one poetic masterpiece in order to give what I have written a solid basis of fact. It is the song of Deborah in the fifth chapter of the book of Judges. In its passion, in its marvelous condensation, in its throbbing patriotism, it shows us the Hebrew genius at its highest and best. Read it in the first volume of Stanley's "Jewish Church," or in the "Modern Reader's Bible." The beauty and power of the song stand out as of a great national chant sung by men and women, strophe and antistrophe, with grand choruses embodying the undying faith and hope of Israel. We commence the prelude, and immediately our pulses begin to throb and tingle. In a rolling thunder of men's voices comes the cry:

Hear, O ye kings!

The answer by the women is:

Give ear, O ye princes!

The men again:

I, even I, will sing unto the Lord!

The women reply:

I will sing praise to the Lord, the God of Israel!

The two sides come together in a splendid chorus, and we hear the words which carry us back to Israel in the wilderness:

Lord, when thou wentest forth out of Seir,
When thou marchedst out of the field of Edom,
The earth trembled, the heavens also dropped,
Yea, the clouds dropped water.
The mountains flowed down at the presence of the Lord,
Even yon Sinai at the presence of the Lord, the God of Israel.

The men again take up the theme and tell us of the desolation that had fallen upon Israel:

In the days of Shamgar the son of Anath,
In the days of Jael,
The highways were unoccupied,
And the travelers walked through byways.
The rulers ceased in Israel, they ceased. . . .

The women in an answering strophe recount to us how this state of affairs was ended:

Until that I Deborah arose,
That I arose a mother in Israel!

The men continue with an impassioned eulogy of those who fought for their country:

My heart is toward the governors of Israel.

Quick as a flash comes the reply of the women:

Ye that offered yourselves willingly among the people.

Once again the two parts come together, and we hear the immortal hallelujah chorus of Israel:

Bless ye the Lord!

The poem tells further of the gathering of the tribes, of those who jeopardized their lives for their country and those who cowardly refused to do anything. There is no more striking example of Hebrew sarcasm than the cry of the

women as they taunt the tribe of Reuben for its great resolves which come to nothing:

Why satest thou among the sheepfolds,
To hear the pipings for the flocks?

The pictures of the battle and the rout next unroll themselves to us. We must remember that, owing to a violent storm of wind and rain, the chariots of Sisera are rendered useless. The field of battle, by the overflow of the river Kishon, becomes a vast quagmire, and the horses and chariots of the Canaanites are hopelessly entangled. We must understand this before we can appreciate these magnificent lines:

They fought from heaven,
The stars in their courses fought against Sisera.
The river Kishon swept them away,
That ancient river, the river Kishon!

Then occurs one of those wonderful examples of poetic style whereby the written words imitate the very sound of the thing signified:

Then did the horse hoofs stamp
By reason of the prancings, the prancings of their strong ones.

We can almost hear the clatter of the horse hoofs, loud and sharp, then dying away in the distance as the enemy on their maddened steeds flee from the field of battle. There follows the curse upon Meroz, on account of its cowardice, pronounced by the women. The hot, fiery blood of the desert throbs through it:

Curse ye Meroz, said the angel of the Lord,
Curse ye bitterly the inhabitant thereof;
Because they came not to the help of the Lord,
To the help of the Lord against the mighty!

The action of the poem now concentrates itself upon the murder of Sisera. Let us frankly confess it is horrible and ghastly. Much more so is it in the original. There is a gloating over the damnable treachery of Jael which is as far removed from the spirit of Christ as darkness is from light. As students of literature, however, we can only stand spell-bound over the account of the murder:

She put her hand to the nail,
And her right hand to the workmen's hammer;
And with the hammer she smote Sisera, she smote through his head,
Yea, she pierced and struck through his temples.
At her feet he bowed, he fell, he lay:
At her feet he bowed, he fell:
Where he bowed, there he fell down dead!

The gloom of the picture is then lightened by an antistrophe of the women. It is nevertheless mockery, which, like hail, beats upon the mother of Sisera awaiting in vain her son's return:

Through the window she looked forth, and cried,
The mother of Sisera, through the lattice,
Why is his chariot so long in coming?
Why tarry the wheels of his chariots?
Her wise ladies answered her,
Yea, she returned answer to herself,
Have they not found, have they not divided the spoil?
A damsel, two damsels, to every man;
To Sisera a spoil of divers colors,
A spoil of divers colors of embroidery,
Of divers colors of embroidery on both sides, on
the necks of the spoil!

We may shudder at the vindictive spirit pulsating through these words, but the concluding lines redeem the poem. In them the genius of Hebrew poetry speaks. The men and women for the last time unite and pour forth their joy and exultation in words that will echo forever:

So let all thine enemies perish, O Lord:
But let them that love him be as the sun when he goeth forth in his might!

GEORGE DOWNING SPARKS.